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Nicaraguans called U.S. spies

Recruiting by CIA charged

By Vincent J. Schodolski
Chicago Tribune

MANAGUA, Nicaragua—The government charged Thursday that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency had recruited three Nicaraguans as spies and named four diplomats from the American Embassy who they said had directed the agents' activities.

Two of the accused Nicaraguans were government employees before their arrest.

Lenin Cerna, director general of state security in the Interior Ministry, presented one of the accused agents at a press conference and displayed an array of equipment he said had been used by the spies. The tools included a camera hidden inside a disposable lighter and a bottle of "pills" he said had been used to decipher secret messages.

Photographs and details of the four U.S. diplomats he accused of running the agents also were provided.

A U.S. Embassy spokesman said it was embassy policy not to comment on matters relating to espionage, but he confirmed that the diplomats named by Cerna had worked at the mission. The spokesman said two had finished their assignments and left the country, and the other two were still here.

Cerna named the two diplomats still in Managua as Bonnie Sue Bennett, 25, a consular official, and Stephen David Murchinson, 43, a political officer.

He said the two officials who had left the country were Bradley Cecil Johnson, 30, an economic officer here until December, 1985, and Benjamin Wickham, 45, a political officer who left last August.

Cerna said Wickham also had worked directly for the CIA while in Nicaragua.

He said Managua would seek the expulsion of the two diplmats still in the country.

The embassy spokesman said he had no information about this. He said Ambassador Harry Bergold had been summoned to the Foreign Ministry Thursday morning and given a diplomatic note, but the spokesman refused to comment on the contents of the message.

The three Nicaraguans were named as José Eduardo Trejos Silva; his wife, Rosalinda Sosa; and Reynaldo Tadeo Aguado Montealegre. The two men were employees of the Interior Ministry.

The first two were arrested on Feb. 19, Cerna said, but the woman was freed after it was determined she had played only a minor role in the alleged activities. Aguado Montealegre was picked up on March 4.

He said all three had been recruited by the CIA and paid what he called large sums of money to gather information about the workings of Nicaragua's state security apparatus.

Aguado Montealegre appeared before more than 100 journalists Thursday and presented what seemed to be a well-rehearsed account of his alleged recruitment by the CIA.

He spoke for more than 30 minutes without notes. He looked tired, pale and nervous, but showed no signs of having been physically abused.

Aguado Montealegre said the CIA wanted him to gather details about the Nicaraguan intelligence and security system, including names of department chiefs and information about what their duties would be in wartime.

He said that in May, 1985, he received a telephone call from his brother in Miami, who told him that their mother, who also lived in Florida, had been diagnosed as having cancer.

He said his brother, sister and mother, in subsequent conversations, asked him to come to Miami to visit. In September, he said, his mother told him she needed an operation and urged him to come immediately.

Aguado Montealegre said he secured permission from Nicaraguan officials and obtained a U.S. visa before leaving for the United States on Oct. 20.

After two days with his mother, he said, he was visited at the family home in Miami by a man who identified himself as William Perez. He said the man appeared to be of Hispanic origin but was a U.S. citizen.

After a brief conversation, he said, Perez told him that his mother did not have cancer and that the whole story had been concocted as a pretext for getting him to Miami.

He said that during the next several days he met with Perez at a Holiday Inn in Miami, where the man produced an identity card that said he worked for the State Department. Perez said he was a CIA agent, the Nicaraguan said.

He said Perez urged him to work for the CIA in Nicaragua. He said Perez told him that if he refused his family would be deported.

"I accept," Aguado Montealegre said.

He said that in subsequent meetings in Miami he was given training in the use of secret cameras and told how to contact U.S. officials once he returned to Managua.

On his last day in Miami he was given $25,500 in cash and promised $5,000 a month for his work. The money was to be deposited in an account in a Miami bank, Aguado Montealegre said.

He said he returned to Nicaragua on Nov. 10 and did not arrange his first meeting with U.S. officials until late January.

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